United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/51

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Plan International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61979 (E) 161211

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Statement

The necessity of eliminating harmful practices and increasing the role of men and boys in order to achieve the empowerment of rural women and girls

This year's priority theme for the Commission on the Status of Women is the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. Plan International has worked to secure child rights across thousands of rural societies, currently in 66 countries, for the past 75 years. This programme experience, supported by the findings from five annual reports from the series entitled "Because I am a girl: the state of the world's girls" provides the organization with an in-depth insight into the scale of disempowerment and lack of agency among women and girls in rural communities, along with the knowledge and experience of how to best address this and increase their empowerment and role in the development of themselves and of the local societies and global community in which they live. Our research and programme experience has consistently demonstrated that education is central to the empowerment of rural women and girls.

Girls and boys throughout the world are subjected to many violent and discriminatory practices. Any form of violence against children, whether physical, psychological or emotional, is a violation of their right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence and a fundamental breach of their dignity and integrity; it affects their chances of achieving a quality education and as such of reaching their full potential. Harmful practices are often performed in the name of tradition and are sometimes sanctioned by customary laws. This is particularly the case in rural locations where the rule of law is less likely to reach and local forces are more powerful. Early and forced marriage is one such practice, embedded in many cultures and traditions, which is experienced by 10 million girls a year.

The age at which girls marry among rural indigenous people tends to be lower than in urbanized areas. In Guatemala, for example, research indicates that indigenous Mayan girls experience higher rates of early marriage, coinciding with their spending fewer years in school. According to a working paper by the Population Council, by the age of 18, almost 40 per cent of Mayan females in Guatemala are married, which is nearly twice the rate of other females of the same age.

This practice keeps girls in poverty. When Plan Egypt carried out a baseline study in four rural communities, they found that early marriage or marriage of school-aged girls was considered the main barrier to achieving Goals 2 and 3 of the Millennium Development Goals, on universal primary education and gender equality, for girls and boys in rural communities.

Ending early and enforced marriage will empower rural women and girls. Getting and keeping girls in school may be one of the best ways to foster later, consensual marriage, while also contributing to delayed sexual initiation, lower rates of HIV and AIDS, reduced maternal mortality and other morbidities, and greater gender equality. One study in rural Bangladesh by the University of London highlighted the fact that, when marriage is delayed, girls are much more likely to stay in school for longer and be literate.

Call to action

The organization recommends that Member States:

- Invest in mechanisms to prevent early and forced marriage and offer protection and support services for girls at risk, including help for families, psychosocial support, child protection resources and legal assistance. Work with partner Governments to develop in-country support networks for women and girls who seek to escape from early or forced marriages.
- Strengthen the enforcement of birth registration, implement laws governing the minimum age for marriage and incorporate measures to prevent early and forced marriage into other Government sector initiatives, such as health, education, employment and domestic wealth creation. In tandem, strengthen laws compelling families to keep boys and girls in school and enforcing a compulsory education age and build the capacity of schools to report cases of marriage before the legal age.
- Seek accountability for the provision of compulsory, free education for girls. At the community level, build an understanding and acceptance of girls' rights among caregivers.
- Fund and publicize existing good practice by civil society and women's organizations on early and forced marriage and the promotion of girls' voices in advocacy for their rights and the building of girl-friendly governance and accountability mechanisms.
- Invest in strengthening the evidence on the relationship between early and forced marriage and girls' education and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the collection of age- and sex-disaggregated data. In particular, fund research into the role of education in preventing or delaying early and forced marriage.

Role of men and boys in improving the lives of women and girls in rural settings

Over 60 per cent of children recently interviewed in India agreed that if resources are scarce it is better to educate a boy instead of a girl. This is one example of how gender inequality starts at an early age and how education is the place where it is best addressed.

In many rural societies and institutions it is men who still control the levers of power, so without support from them we will not achieve equality. History shows us that the legislation that has helped women's empowerment has in fact been largely put in place by male legislators.

Gender equality cannot be achieved without far better participation from men and boys, particularly the fathers, brothers and husbands in girls' and women's lives. Girls have a right to better gender equality, but that does not mean they should shoulder the burden of achieving it alone. This focus on men and boys is the theme of the organization's 2012 report on the state of the world's girls, entitled "So, what about boys?".

Two examples of how men have helped women and girls in rural settings to achieve the empowerment and rights they deserve are as follows:

- Seiku Soya, a 65-year-old farmer from Guinea, was appalled when he learned about the dangers of female genital cutting. He refused to let his nine daughters go through the local initiation ceremony. He was ostracized for several years by his community and even forced to dig his own well for his family. Seiku's brave stance was eventually vindicated when the rest of the village rejected cutting after a local health campaign.
- Egyptian Imam El Sheikh Saad is deputy chairman of El Mandara Community Development Association, the local partner of Plan Egypt in the village of El Mandara. His beliefs changed after meeting with doctors and social workers at a Plan workshop on harmful traditional practices. He is now a strong campaigner against the dangers of early marriage and female genital mutilation, including for his own 6-year-old daughter. A number of imams are now taking such a stance.

Action plan to increase role of men and boys: educate, campaign, legislate

The organization recommends that Member States:

- Promote preschool education equality between girls and boys and involve parents.
- Transform school curricula to challenge stereotypes.
- Support girls' and boys' participation in the creation of policies to improve sex education.
- Make schools safe for girls and boys.
- Pass laws that enable both parents to take an active part in raising their children.
- Enforce legislation to end violence against women and girls.
- Legislate for equal opportunities.